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The Syriac manuscripts of Deir al-Surian: some first impressions

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Deir al-Surian, the Coptic Orthodox monastery in the Wadi Natrun half way between Cairo and Alexandria, deserves to be in the Guinness Book of Records for the number of 'firsts' it can claim: over the centuries it has preserved the largest collection of Syriac manuscripts in the world; among these is the oldest dated Christian literary manuscript in any language (AD 411), the oldest dated biblical manuscript in any language (Isaiah, AD 459/60), and the oldest dated Gospel manuscript in any language (AD 510). Of these three manuscripts the first and the third were written in Edessa (modern Sanliurfa in SE Turkey), the original home of the Aramaic dialect known today as Syriac.

Although a large number of the monastery's original collection of Syriac manuscripts are today in Rome and London, having been acquired by the Vatican Library in the 18th century, and by British Museum in the 19th, a respectable quantity still remains there, and these include a number of works of great importance. Although a summary catalogue was made of these some half century ago by Murad Kamil, a noted Egyptian scholar of Semitic languages, it is only in recent years that work has been commenced on a much more detailed catalogue of the Syriac manuscripts that are still in the monastery's library. This is being done in conjunction with the programme of conservation of the monastery's manuscripts undertaken by the Levantine Foundation under the direction of Elizabeth Sobczynski.

Although there are only forty manuscripts, since many of these consist of several completely different manuscripts which have been bound up together, the number is in reality considerably higher. Furthermore, there are over 150 fragments, ranging in size from diminutive scraps to a few reasonably complete folios. As part of the process of compiling the catalogue, our second visit together took place over a fortnight in May of 2005, and it is on some of the most interesting of our discoveries that we report on here.

Highlights from the Syriac collection

These forty manuscripts do in fact present a very special challenge to the Syriac student. Only half of them survived as independent manuscripts. Some of these are incomplete; others have lost their cover

as well as the initial and final folios. Apart from these losses and some additional damage at the beginning and end, however, the parchment (the material used for most pre-10th-century manuscripts) is often in good condition. It is still remarkably strong, even though some basic consolidation work is urgently required. The other half of the manuscripts went through medieval restoration processes, during which parts of various manuscripts were bound together. In some cases the medieval restorers were careful enough to bind together texts of similar content (such as biblical texts or ascetical texts); in other cases the combination was made less consciously and parts of manuscripts were put together only because their size was much the same.

These composite manuscripts, therefore, are full of surprises, as the content and time of composition of the texts may radically change from one section to the other. An additional feature of medieval restoration practices is that pieces of waste-parchment (stemming from dismantled manuscripts) was used for repair work, to strengthen the cover, or to separate the different quires of the new manuscript. Such pieces, although diminutive, are of interest in their own right: they should be treated as fragments. They are detached from their original context, sometimes trimmed to fit the new manuscript, partly erased, occasionally glued together, and often tantalisingly difficult to read. But each of them has its own story to tell and may give us insight in to the intellectual life in the library and the monastery as well as the work carried out in the restoration workshop.

In the relatively modest collection of forty manuscripts, the number of (portions of) manuscripts dated or datable to the 6th and 7th centuries is remarkably high. At least eighteen pieces may safely be attributed to this early period (one manuscript, no. 9, which has the four Gospels, may be attributed to the 5th century!). In the 6th and 7th centuries Syriac Christian culture was still in its heyday and every new piece of evidence is an extremely precious addition to our limited corpus of data. Even if many of the texts are known from elsewhere, the new Deir al-Surian manuscripts are often older than the other available evidence. They will, therefore, be of prime importance in the future study of a number of early Syriac texts. It goes

without saying that these early manuscripts were all written in Syria or Mesopotamia, as Syriac manuscripts only started being brought to Deir al-Surian in the ninth century. From the 9th century onwards, Deir al-Surian had its own scriptorium in which Syriac manuscripts were produced.

Ms. 16 is one of the manuscripts which we were able to study in some detail during our recent May campaign. It is a composite manuscript. Folios 1 to 75 stem from two different 6th- or 7th-century manuscripts containing homilies by John Chrysostom, an author who was very popular, not only in the Greek world, but also in the Syriac churches. Most of these homilies are known in Greek as well as in a number of Syriac manuscripts, but our manuscript is important due to its early date (one folio is missing at the beginning, but this happens to survive in the British Library as ms. Add. 14,670, f. 1). This would surely be enough for a Syriac scholar to get excited about. But the real surprise comes with the third section of this manuscript, comprising folios 76 to 194. This was originally an independent manuscript of the 7th century which, according to a note on f. 76r, was brought from Baghdad to Deir al-Surian in 932 AD, by Moses of Nisibis, one of the most famous abbots of the monastery. The title is given as 'Treatise on faith'. Three marginal notes, however, identify the work as 'Book of the mind', written by Mar Aba, the disciple of Ephrem (d. 373). We are dealing, in fact, with a systematic work of spiritual and ascetical content which to our knowledge does not exist anywhere else in Syriac manuscripts. In a carefully written language which has distinct literary qualities and uses quite a sophisticated terminology, the author gives spiritual advice which focuses on faith as the unifying factor in man's life - counterbalancing the composite nature of his body - and on man's proper relationship to his Creator. Some of the imagery reminds one of Ephrem's works, and there can be little doubt that the work was originally written in Syriac and was not translated from Greek. Although our reading of the work was rather hasty, we thought that a date around the year 400 would be most likely.

If these first impressions prove to have some

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Ms. Deir al-Surian, Syr. 23, f. 65v. "Stupid Abraham" is now the artist of this ornamental cross identified himself. He worked in AD 873. This leaflet is bound together with parts from four other manuscripts

foundation, we would be dealing with a very important addition to the modest corpus of Syriac literature of the 4th and early 5th century. With its 118 folios, or nearly 7000 lines of Syriac text, this really would be a major new document, the publication, translation, and study of which would be a fascinating task for more than one Syriac scholar

Confronted with such a discovery, it is difficult not to focus on just this one text and to forget about all the other manuscripts. But in fact most of the other manuscripts, in particular the earlier ones, have their own surprises in store. Ms. 22 is another manuscript which received some attention in our May campaign. Again, this is a composite manuscript. Its first part (folios 1 to 94) contains writings by Ephrem, Isaac of Antioch, and Jacob of Serug, and it easily ranks among the very earliest witnesses for each of these authors. Around thirty folios are missing from the beginning of this manuscript, but with the exception of two or three folios, they all can be found in the British Library as ms. Add. 14,573. Now, these ninety-four folios (distributed over 10 quires) at an unknown point in time were bound together with a most remarkable collection of thirty-two folios, taken from five different manuscripts, mostly of the 9th and 10th centuries. The content of these folios is Greek philosophy, a field in which Syriac Christians were very much interested. While some of these texts are known from other Syriac manuscripts and have been the subject of recent scholarship, others seem to be unique. They refer to various Greek philosophers and commentators of Plato and Aristotle, and deal with such topics as the origin of matter and the nature of the human soul. Interestingly, one of the philosophical texts has a marginal note saying that the manuscript in question (which of course we are unable to reconstruct in its full form) was given as

a present to Deir al-Surian by patriarch Abraham, who headed the Coptic Church from 977 to 981 and happened to be of Syrian origin.

It is hardly possible to overestimate the importance of the Syriac manuscripts of Deir al-Surian. They are our main sources for the study of early Syriac literature and culture and at the same time they give us insight into the very special relations that existed between Egyptian and Syriac Christianity. Before anything else, however, the manuscripts which presently are in the Monastery should be preserved in the best possible conditions and, where necessary, should be conserved and consolidated.

An exciting discovery among the fragments

Although the fragments might at first sight look totally unprepossessing and unpromising, this has proved definitely not to be the case. In the first place, quite a large proportion of the fragments - tantalisingly usually the smallest! - are written in hands which can be securely dated to about the 6th century. Since the number of surviving Syriac manuscripts of this date is not large, even the smallest fragment of this date can turn out to be of interest, above all if the text it contains can be identified, for then it allows one to build up a picture of what sort of texts made up the contents of the library in its original form. On the basis of the notes taken during our previous visit together, in December 2004, it proved possible to make a number of 'joins' between fragments still in the monastery and manuscripts in the British Library which were purchased from the monastery in the 19th century. In the course of our May visit another very exciting join was identified. The manuscript dated AD 411, mentioned above, is today in the British Library, and it contains a number of texts translated from Greek, the majority of which do not survive in their Greek original and are only known from this single manuscript. Right at the end of this manuscript is a list of people who suffered martyrdom in the Persian Empire in the mid-4th century during a savage persecution in the reign of the Shah Shapur II; the folio with the end of this list, however, is badly torn, and only a small proportion is preserved. It was thus a moment of great excitement when we realised that among the fragments were three small strips of parchment which came from this damaged folio. It was possible to be sure of this identification at once for two reasons: firstly because of the content, with parts of columns containing lists of names, and secondly, because of the very beautiful and distinctive calligraphic hand in which this manuscript is written (it even served as a model for



Ms. Deir al-Surian, Syr. 20, f. 4r. The manuscript contains the 'Book of the Holy Hierotheos'. The author is depicted here (right) standing next to patriarch Cynacius (793-817). The two figures in the upper part are identified as Zakkay (right) and Mattay (left), but are otherwise unknown

one of the Cambridge University Press's Syriac type faces!). Shortly after returning to England it was possible to visit the British Library and compare a transcript of the fragments with the damaged folio at the end of the manuscript in the British Library: two of them fitted nicely into what was left on the damaged folio, while the third, though definitely belonging to the same folio, evidently comes from a part of the original folio which does not otherwise survive (now that we have been through all the fragments, there does not seem to be any hope that more fragments from the same folio might turn up in the monastery). But thanks to these new fragments we now have the names of a number of new martyrs, both men and women; in a few cases a detailed account of their martyrdom is preserved elsewhere. It so happens that we can be fairly sure of the circumstances in which the names of these Persian martyrs reached Edessa: in 410 Marutha, the bishop of Maifarqat (today in E. Turkey) was sent by the Roman emperor as ambassador to the Persian Shah. During the course of his visit he took the opportunity of getting a synod of the Persian bishops to accept officially the Council of Nicaea (of 325): since this was a council convened by the Roman Emperor, the Church in the Persian Empire had not been involved at the time. In the course of this synod Marutha learnt of these martyrs and in fact took back with him some of their bones as relics (as a result of which Maifarqat was given the new name of Martyropolis, 'city of martyrs'). It would have been on his return home, by way of Edessa, that Marutha provided the list of these martyrs, hitherto unknown in the Roman Empire, and this will then have been copied down, in November 411, at the end of our manuscript as important hot news.



Professor Lucas van Rompay with the AD 411 Syriac fragments.

Book Reviews

Andrea SCHMIDT und Stephan WESTPHALEN, *Christliche Wandmalereien in Syrien. Qara und das Kloster Mar Yakub. Mit Beiträgen von Sebastian Brock, Mat Immerzeel und Christine Strube*, Wiesbaden: Reichert Verlag, 2005 (Sprachen und Kulturen des Christlichen Orients 14), 240 pp.; Tafeln I-XX (color) and 1-26 (black and white); ISBN: 3-89500-395-6.

This rich book brings the reader to three different sites in Syria. Each of them has (remnants of) recently uncovered Christian wall paintings and inscriptions. The sites are: the village of Qara, ca. 95 km northeast of Damascus, with the nearby Monastery of Mar Jacob; the village of Ma'arrat Saydnaya, 30 km north of Damascus, with the Chapel of the Prophet Elijah; and the village of al-Andarin, 60 km northeast of Hama. The main part of the book is devoted to Qara (A. Schmidt, S. Westphalen, S. Bosch, J. Verhey, and A. Berger, pp. 13-153), whereas Ma'arrat Saydnaya (M. Immerzeel, pp. 155-182) and al-Andarin (C. Strube and S. Brock, pp. 183-202) receive more modest treatment.

The book opens with a well-documented survey of the Christian history of Qara by A. Schmidt (pp. 13-68). First mentioned in the middle of the fifth century, Qara seems to have been on the Chalcedonian side from the very beginning of the Christological controversies of the fifth and sixth centuries. The sources are almost completely silent for the first five centuries of the Islamic period, but when Qara reemerges in history, around 1100 CE, it still is a center of Byzantine Orthodoxy. The period between ca. 1100 and 1266 constitutes the heyday of Christian culture in Qara, which came to an abrupt end in 1266, when Sultan Baibars, in his offensive against Crusaders and Mongols, expelled or killed the Christians of Qara. Qara became a Muslim town. It was quickly able, however, to regain some of its Christian population and to become an important Christian center again, with prominent bishops and a rich scribal tradition that was passed on by influential families. Only in the seventeenth century did Qara lose its status as an independent bishopric, followed by the demise of the Mar Jacob Monastery, which was left in ruins by an earthquake in 1759. When Qara moved into the Melkite-Catholic (or Greek-Catholic, or Rum-Catholic) ecclesiastical sphere in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there were occasional attempts at rebuilding the monastery, all of which failed. It was only in the 1990s, under the

dynamic leadership of the Lebanese Carmelite Soeur Agnès-Maria de la Croix, that the monastery and its church were rebuilt and became the home of a community of female ascetics, belonging to the jurisdiction of the Melkite-Catholic bishop of Homs, Hama, Yabrud, and Qara. Several pieces of wall paintings, removed and brought to museums in Damascus and Deir 'Atiya in the 1970s, were returned to the monastery and were joined to the newly uncovered paintings, thus allowing for a comprehensive study of the artistic legacy of the monastery.

S. Westphalen gives a full description of the church of the monastery, focusing on its wall paintings, which, however, are in a very fragmentary state. The author does an excellent job in bringing all the data together. Where it is possible, he gives the reader an intimation of the entire artistic program, not just of the individual fragments. The church, which in its present form may go back to the eleventh century, has a horizontal division into two parts, creating room for two more or less parallel iconographic programs. Moreover, the author argues that there are two layers of wall paintings, the first one datable to the first half of the eleventh century, the second to the first half of the thirteenth century.

Prominent among the paintings of the first layer is a cycle with scenes from the life of Christ. It covered the southern, western, and northern walls of the nave of the lower church. As for the thirteenth-century layer, a large Deisis composition existed in the lower apse. In addition, both the lower and the upper apses had a row of images of bishops, or church fathers. Only few of these could be identified.

In each of the two rows, the upper and the lower one, there is one church father whom the authors were not able to identify, even though we seem to have (part of) their names, once written in Greek, and once in Syriac. I would like to suggest that in both cases we are dealing with the same figure (this is not the only case of overlap between the two rows), who may be identified as Epiphanius of Salamis (on Cyprus).

He first occurs as no. 2 in the lower apse (see p. 108 and p. 140, sub 14c, 'Zweiter Bischof', and Taf. Xb). The Greek text is read as [...]HΘANHOC (p. 140), which I would suggest to read as [ΕΠ]HΘANHOC, i.e., Epithanios.

The other case is the ninth bishop in the upper apse (see p. 108 and p. 148, sub 18d). A. Schmidt reads the Syriac text as: [ܡܪ ܡܥܪܝܢ ܕܢܝܣܐ] "the holy Mar (read *mârê*, i.e., construct state?) of the house Nyssa" and ventures the suggestion that Gregory of Nyssa is meant. I would suggest reading: ܡܪ ܡܥܪܝܢ ܕܢܝܣܐ "the holy Mar Ebithanios".

A. Schmidt herself points out that, in the orthography of some of the names, the influence of Arabic pronunciation can be noticed (p. 139), e.g., Philibos for Philippus, and Butros for Peter (pp. 146 and 147). In both cases *b* is written rather than *p*. Now, the interchange between *th* (ث, θ – ت) and *ph* (ف, φ – ف) is quite common in the older phase of the Arabic language, see, e.g., H. Fleisch, *Traité de philologie arabe*, I (Beirut, 1961), p. 75, as well as W. Wright's quotation from the lexicographer al-Jawharī, who died in the early eleventh century (*Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles*, p. 186, note: 'The Arabs substitute *f* for *th*'). 'Epithanios' in Greek and 'Ebithanios' in Syriac may, therefore, render the name 'Epiphanius'. If this suggestion is substantiated, this particular spelling would allow us to pinpoint an interesting phenomenon of Arabic phonetics in the Qalamun region in the eleventh and twelfth century.

Epiphanius, the fourth-century author of several influential texts, certainly would not be a stranger in the rows of church fathers. As a matter of fact, he is commonly depicted in the apse of twelfth-century churches in Cyprus (see R. Cormack, *Writing in Gold. Byzantine Society and Its Icons*, London, 1985, p. 237). Whether this might be seen as a further link between the (first layer of the) Qara paintings and Cyprus (comp. S. Westphalen, pp. 91-95) remains to be ascertained.

The next section of the book is devoted to the wall paintings of the Melkite-Catholic Chapel of the prophet Elijah. M. Immerzeel provides a full description and analyzes the different hands. He argues that the earliest artist, who was responsible for the remarkable, though heavily damaged, Ascension of Elijah in the upper zone of the north wall, worked in the eleventh century, while a second artist, who decorated a niche as well as other parts of the chapel, must have been active around 1200 or in the first half of the thirteenth century. Among the paintings of the second artist there is a very beautiful Virgin with Child, Saint Nicolas, and a row of standing saints (the same theme as the one in Qara, but more innovative here, whereas the one in Qara is more traditional; comp. Westphalen, p. 109). Immerzeel ventures the supposition that the second artist, who seems to be working in the late Comnenian style of Cyprus, may have been a Cypriot himself (pp. 180-181). Due to the very fragmentary state of the paintings and texts, here again many questions remain. Future work on this exceptional ensemble should also include a proper edition and study of all the Greek texts (no Syriac texts were uncovered here).

The final section of the book deals with an Annunciation scene that was recently uncovered in the sixth-century Byzantine 'Castro' of al-Andarin (ancient Androna). The presence of this Christian theme in a non-religious space is surprising and raises the question of the original date and function of the painting. Moreover, part of Mary's dress is covered with a Syriac inscription, which is a private prayer by a certain Abraham, the administrator (*purnāsā*, an unusual spelling for the more common *parnāsā*). The problems related to the painting are expertly discussed by C. Strube (pp. 183-198), while S. Brock contributes an edition, translation, and study of the Syriac inscription (pp. 199-202). While Strube struggles with the question whether or not the painting was applied to the building shortly after it had been completed or at a later

date, Brock, on paleographical grounds, dates the Syriac inscription tentatively to the eighth or ninth century. Since the inscription most likely was a later addition, this does not help us to date the painting, except that it provides a *terminus ante quem*.

The different sections of the book, taken together, constitute an important addition to our knowledge of Syrian Christian painting of the late ancient and medieval periods. The contributions of Westphalen and Immerzeel, in particular, address some of the broader issues, such as the cultural and art-historical contextualization of Syrian Christian art, its interaction with the art of other geographical and cultural areas, and the possible connection between religious art and Syrian Christian identity. Both authors reflect on the concept of 'Syrian style', borrowed from E. Cruikshank Dodd's study of the Mar Musa wall paintings (*The Frescoes of Mar Musa al-Habashi. A Study in Medieval Painting in Syria*, Toronto, 2001), even though they seem to use the concept in a narrower sense than Cruikshank Dodd did. Westphalen describes the 'Syrian style' in purely stylistic terms, and limits it to the period between ca. 1100 and 1250 (pp. 120-124). The artist of the second layer of painting in Qara is seen as a representative of this style (see p. 95); other examples are certain paintings in the Monastery of Mar Musa, in the Church of Mar Elian at Homs, and in the Church of Mar Tadros at Bahdeidat (Lebanon). Along with the 'Syrian style', there existed a different style, or different styles (?), defined as essentially Byzantine. This is the case for the first layer of paintings in Qara (Westphalen, p. 81), which are datable to the first half of the eleventh century – i.e., prior to the heyday of the 'Syrian style' – as well as for the paintings of the second artist working at Ma'arrat Saydnaya, in the first half of the thirteenth century, i.e., contemporaneous with the 'Syrian style' (Immerzeel, pp. 176-181). The categories of 'Syrian' and 'non-Syrian' styles may need some further refinement and should not be allowed to create rigid distinctions that may not do full justice to the cultural complexities of the Syrian region in the Medieval period.

A final word should be said about the presentation of the book. The text and the illustrations are well presented, and most of the photographs and drawings are of good quality. For Qara and Ma'arrat Saydnaya, I personally would have appreciated a few more overview pictures or drawings, which would make it easier to locate the individual paintings. More serious is the fact that for some inscriptions no photograph or drawing is provided (e.g. for the Syriac inscription naming Gregory of Nyssa or Epiphanius, Catalogue, no. 18d, p. 148). For one Syriac inscription (Catalogue, 26, pp. 151-152), which is based upon Ps. 148, both the drawing and the photograph are of poor quality. These few critical remarks, however, by no means detract from the reader's overall feelings of appreciation, admiration, and gratitude for the fine product of this important collaborative project.

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